

REGIONAL NEWS

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Leventhal blasts Grafton School for closing

■ Rockville school for autistic children still owes more than \$450,000 on interest-free loan; CEO vows to repay it

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The County Council wants a Rockville school for autistic children to pay for closing later this month, breaking its lease, leaving families to find new schools and endangering a center for infants and toddlers that shares its space.

On Monday, Council President George L. Leventhal blasted the Grafton School Inc. for closing while it still owes more than \$467,000 on a \$1.5 million interest-free loan the county gave the private nonprofit in 1998.

Leventhal said the council wants to collect on the loan and for services that Grafton still owes.

So far, no new provider has been found to take over the school and keep the services in the county, which parents and county officials say are crucial.

"This should be a very, very costly bad decision on Grafton's part, and our county attorney should be doing everything he can to make sure it is," Leventhal said. "And we are discussing that with Grafton and are pursuing our options in that legal regard."

On Tuesday, Grafton's president and chief executive officer shot back.

"One reason they may have a hard time securing a qualified provider, you may have



Leventhal

witnessed what some of the dynamics are," James G. Gaynor said.

Gaynor said Grafton did everything it could to remain open while facing almost \$3 million in losses.

"[The County Council] better come up with a better design next time because we wouldn't entertain going back," he said.

Grafton is negotiating with the county on repaying the loan, Gaynor said.

"We will remain and continue to suffer losses even though that may jeopardize services for the other 300 people we serve," at schools in Virginia, he said. "Grafton will meet every one of its obligations."

That means paying its half of the \$1.5 million loan, Gaynor said.

Grafton, which opened in 1996, sent letters to parents on Dec. 2 announcing that it planned to close this month.

That left parents and county and state agencies, including the county school system, scrambling to find new schools for 42 children, including some who live at the school.

Schools have been found for the 16 students placed at Grafton by the county school system. But council members are upset that the nonprofit is walking away from a facility that the state and county spent millions to renovate just eight years ago.

"In my 20 years here, I believe this has got to be the most egregious action taken by any provider, anywhere in this county," said Councilman Michael L. Subin (D-At large) of Gaithersburg.

Grafton has solicited bids to take over the Rockville facility, Gaynor said. Proposals came from Chimes, Maryland. The Arc of Montgomery County, Community Support Services Inc. and Community Services for Autistic

STATE AND COUNTY MONEY SPENT ON GRAFTON

- \$1.5 million interest-free loan to renovate the former Montrose Elementary School on Academy Way in Rockville
- \$1 million state bond bill
- \$1 million in county grants for facility improvements
- \$600,000 in state grants
- 4 percent loan from the county to support the purchase of four residential properties for students

SOURCE: MONTGOMERY COUNTY COUNCIL

Adults and Children, he said.

Grafton was not able to find a suitable provider to pass its licenses to, Gaynor said. Some providers did not want to pick up the residential services; others did not want to take on so many students.

"Clearly, we served a population or niche that existing providers aren't fully interested in serving," Gaynor said.

On Monday, Leventhal accused Grafton and its operator of threatening the future of the nonprofit Reginald S. Lourie Center for Infants and Young Children.

Grafton shares the former Montrose Elementary School on Academy Way in Rockville with the Lourie Center, which provides mental health and education services for children with social, emotional and behavioral problems.

In 1998, the Lourie Center and Grafton

agreed to pay back a \$1.5 million county loan in monthly installments between January 2000 and July 2014.

As of October, the schools had made 68 of 167 monthly payments. Jointly, they still owe more than \$935,000, an amount that Leventhal and Subin said they want to make sure Lourie is not left to pay by itself.

"Someone has to talk to Lourie to make sure we're not hanging two bricks around their next and throwing them into the water," said Subin, who sits on the Lourie Center's board of directors. William M. Schlossenberg, The Gazette's director of corporate affairs, also sits on the board.

Gaynor was invited to the Monday meeting, Leventhal said.

"He is not here," Leventhal said. "He should be. He has a lot to answer for."

Gaynor said he had attended an earlier meeting with council staff and was "not trying to send a message" with his absence.

"We supplied them with the information they needed," he said. "It had become clear that there weren't any viable providers to step in and take over and that the County Council's going to have to step in and rebuild that capacity in the future."

The school stopped teaching students on Feb. 3. Parents have been told that the seven group residences, which housed 29 students, will close Feb. 17.

Leventhal called for a meeting in March with representatives from the state Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the state Developmental Disabilities Administration.

"I want to figure out whether this is a canary in a coal mine or whether Grafton is just a particularly bad and irresponsible provider," Leventhal said.